

CASA volunteers assist kids in transition

By SARAH RUF Staff Writer | 0 comments

When state Child Protective Services decides its time for children to leave their parents' home, the next steps can be confusing and scary.

Adjusting to a foster family is hard enough. Pile on the myriad court hearings and motions and lawyers, and the stress can be overwhelming.

That's where a Court Appointed Special Advocate can help.

As the population in Pinal County grows, so do the number of child welfare cases. For each case, judges typically receive reports from overworked protective services employees, who often are spread too thin to offer individualized attention to each child.

But judges can assign a CASA volunteer to provide another overview, which often proves valuable as an outside perspective on the child's wellbeing.

Acting as the judge's "eyes and ears" for a child's case makes a huge difference, said Pam Burke, CASA coordinator for Pinal County.

"A CASA can visit as much as once a week," Burke said. "They are concerned with getting to know that child. It takes someone who is really committed to children and the process."

Shilo Birnie knows that's true. The stay-at-home mom of three spends an hour or two each month to visit with two girls currently staying with a foster family.

"Sometimes I think there are so many people involved (on a case), sometimes a child's need can be overlooked," Birnie, 29, said.

After going through training last year, the Maricopa resident received her first assignment eight months ago and is required to stay with the girls' case until it ends. She said the rewards come with knowing she can help.

"I meet with my kids and I interview people," she said. This can include talking with foster parents, teachers, doctors and biological parents. Advocates also accompany their kids in the courtroom.

"For my case I've been able to summarize where the various parties are coming from, so the judge is able to get a better picture," she said. "Kind of like a court reporter."

Listening is an important part of the job.

“For me, I feel more drawn to older kids, so I’m able to talk with my kids and get their point of view and in turn present that to the court,” Birnie said. “Not to say we just blindly give them what they want, but we listen and take them into account.”

The CASA program got its start in Seattle in 1977. A Superior Court judge wanted more information to supplement case worker reports in order to decide child welfare cases. It has grown to include 933 programs across the nation that link kids up with courtroom advocates.

Arizona is one of few states that shell out funding to CASA directly, via state lottery funds, rather than delegating a nonprofit status to the organization. Last year, Arizona’s program received about \$3 million.

Ideally, every child would be paired up with a CASA. But that’s not the reality. There are a lot more youths in need than available volunteers. That means Burke and her colleagues must decide which ones are in dire need of an advocate.

“Children who are really young can’t speak for themselves,” she said. “It all depends on the severity of the abuse or neglect or if they have family support.”

Volunteers must go through an application and screening process that involves a private interview, preparation sessions and a polygraph test.

Burke doesn’t apologize for the thorough testing. “Our attitude is, they’ve been victimized once, we don’t want to victimize them again,” she said.

There are currently eight volunteers in Maricopa and 60 in the entire county. CASA seeks out volunteers from all cultures and genders, but women are disproportionately represented among the group.

“I need more male volunteers,” Burke said. “A volunteer may be the only stable adult presence in a kid’s life.”

Birnie said it’s worth it. “Overall you get to be a voice for a child that may or may not have a voice, you can bridge that gap and I think that’s what is really awesome about CASA.”

Volunteers must be at least 21 years old, have a felony-free record and a desire to make a difference. For more information about becoming an advocate, contact the CASA office at 866-7076 or visit azcourts.gov/casaofpinalcounty.